

Kris Kristofferson  
by Peter Stone Brown

No one could say that Kris Kristofferson, who will be appearing October 20<sup>th</sup> at Symphony Hall has led a life unfulfilled. Kristofferson has had three long lasting careers were some people have had one, songwriter, performing and recording artist, and actor. Kristofferson himself might disagree with this assessment because his original ambition was to be a novelist.

Born in 1936 to a military family, Kristofferson's family moved frequently before settling in San Mateo, California, where he attended Pomona College, graduating a degree in literature. He earned a Rhodes Scholarship and attended Oxford University at Merton. While in England, he started writing songs and recorded unsuccessfully as Kris Carson.

Returning home after graduation, he married and delighted his family by joining the army, achieving the rank of captain and becoming a helicopter pilot. He was eventually stationed in West Germany and it was there he resumed writing songs and formed a band. When his tour of duty ended, he was assigned to teach literature at West Point. Desiring to be a songwriter, he turned down the offer, causing his family to disown him. There was never a reconciliation.

Kristofferson moved to Nashville and worked odd jobs during the day while writing songs at night. One of the jobs was being a janitor at Columbia Records studios, where he witnessed some of the recording sessions for Bob Dylan's legendary album, *Blonde On Blonde*.

He would also commute to Louisiana where he worked as a helicopter pilot for oil rigs. Some of his most famous songs including "Me And Bobby McGhee" were written in Louisiana, and "Help Me Make It Through The Night" was written while he was sitting on top of an oil platform. One of Kristofferson's first outrageous acts was landing a helicopter unannounced in Johnny Cash's yard to give him some tapes of his songs.

In 1966, Kristofferson had his first success when country singer Dave Dudley, best known for singing truck driving songs such as "Six Days On The Road," recorded his song "Vietnam Blues." A year later Kristofferson signed to Epic records and released a failed single, "Golden Idol/Killing Time." However, his songs were being recorded by various country singers including Roger Miller, Jerry Lee Lewis and hitting the charts. Several of his songs would hit the charts more than once for different singers.

Eventually he signed to Monument Records and released his eponymous debut in 1970 to little success. But more and more singers were recording his songs, and taking them high on the charts, and the previous year Johnny Cash introduced him as a special guest at the Newport Folk Festival, exposing him not only to a whole other audience, but an entirely different group of musicians who soon would also be recording his songs. This led to appearances at other folk festivals, and because of it Kristofferson was not only a Nashville songwriter, but a singer-songwriter and he would soon form relationships with other singer-songwriters such as Gordon Lightfoot (who recorded and had a hit with "Me And Bobby McGhee." His newfound success ended his marriage and he had a brief affair with Janis Joplin.

In 1970 Ray Price had a huge hit with "For The Good Times," and Johnny Cash had an equally huge hit with "Sunday Morning Coming Down." Price's record won "Song of the Year" from the Academy of Country Music while the Cash recording won the same award from the Country Music Association. This was the only time the same songwriter won the award from both organizations in the same year for different songs.

Kristofferson's debut album was reissued under the title "Me And Bobby McGhee" and suddenly started selling. Also in 1970 Kristofferson played the Isle of Wight Music Festival alongside such songwriters as Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen and finds to his surprise they take him seriously as a songwriter.

In 1971, Kristofferson recorded his second and best album, *The Silver Tongued Devil and I*. The album contained such classics as "Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)," which was already a hit for Roger Miller," "The Pilgrim, Chapter 33," and "The Taker," and a tribute/eulogy for Janis Joplin, "Epitaph." Joplin's recording of "Me And Bobby McGhee" released posthumously was an incredible hit staying out the top of the charts for week easily outselling all the other versions of the song, which has been recorded at least 60 times. "Silver Tongued Devil" sealed Kristofferson's reputation as a songwriter to be taken seriously.

Following his Los Angeles debut, at the legendary club, Troubadour, Kristofferson started receiving acting offers. Dennis Hopper persuaded him to be in his film, *The Last Movie*, which was followed by an appearance in *Cisco Pike* with Gene Hackman.

In 1972 Kristofferson released his third album *Border Lord*, with the song, "Somebody Nobody Knows" standing out. The sales are nowhere near what they were for his previous album. He continues to act and also records and releases his fourth album, *Jesus Was A Capricorn* and has a hit with "Why Me." The album has one other standout, "Nobody Wins," a top-five country hit for Brenda Lee. During this time, despite recording two albums and making films, Kristofferson took time out to help launch the careers of two Chicago-based singer-songwriters, Steve Goodman and John Prine.

Kristofferson married singer Rita Coolidge in 1973, and acted in two more movies, *Blume In Love* and Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*, in which he had a starring role along with James Coburn. Kristofferson convinced Bob Dylan to take a role in the film - his acting debut - and Dylan also wrote the soundtrack, some of which was recorded with members of Kristofferson's band.

Kristofferson stopped recording in Nashville and recorded his next album *Spooky Lady's Sideshow* with producer David Anderle who would produce Kristofferson through the '70s. Listening to the albums Anderle produced now, the production seems dated and though each album had a few good songs, it was clear his songwriting was taking a hit as he made more and more films, the biggest being a remake of *A Star Is Born* where he co-starred with Barbara Streisand and won a Golden Globe for best actor, and the low point being the ill-fated *Heaven's Gate*. Divorcing Coolidge in 1980, Kristofferson finally switched producers and then record labels, only recorded two albums by himself in the '80s. However in 1985, he joined forces with Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings for the super group, The Highwaymen, who were an immediate success and would record two more albums over the next decade.

In 1995, Kristofferson released *A Moment of Forever* on a small indie label, Justice Records. Working with producer Don Was (who continues to produce him to this day), the album signaled a return to serious songwriting and Was' production surrounded Kristofferson with sympathetic musicians and a sound conducive to his music. Over the years Kristofferson's songs had taken more of a political and socially conscious bent and this album was no exception with songs such as "Shipwrecked In the Eighties" and "Slouching Towards The Millennium" with the standout being the tribute to Native American activist and songwriter John Trudell, "Johnny Lobo."

It would be 11 years before Kristofferson released another studio album, *This Old Road*. It was easily his best album in decades, and included new recordings of three songs previously recorded, the title

track originally on the album *Repossessed*, "The Burden of Freedom" from *Border Lord* and "Wild Americans" which Kristofferson did with The Highwaymen. The backing on the album is sparse, an occasional mandolin, bass, second guitar or backup vocal, but it also allowed the songs to be in the forefront and the vocals are impassioned. The album is autobiographical reflections dealing with themes Kristofferson has dealt with for years, freedom, salvation, sanity in a world hurling towards destruction and alcoholism. What makes the album exceptional is in every way Kristofferson lets you know he's lived what he's singing about whether in "The Show Goes On," which anyone who paid attention to music in the '60s and '70s should be able to relate to or in the heartfelt "Thank You For A Life" or the closing tribute to Willie Nelson, "Final Attraction."

In 2009, Kristofferson followed up with *Closer To the Bone*, an album similar in mood and feel to its predecessor with equally spare backing. There is a beautiful song to his daughter "From Here To Forever," a tribute to Johnny Cash written in the '70s, "Good Morning John," and the album ends with the first complete song he wrote when he was 11, "I Hate Your Ugly Face." Overriding the album is the feeling of a man who knows things will soon be coming to a close and this feeling is made more effective by his weathered voice in a way that is reminiscent of Johnny Cash's final recordings.

In January of this year *Feeling Mortal* was released on Kristofferson's own label KK Records to mixed reviews. Again the backing is subtle and sparse, but there is no artifice here. Always more a storyteller than a poet, *Feeling Mortal* is the work of man looking in the mirror and seeing every decade of his life, the high points, the mistakes and chronicling them with both humor and a sad grace. Those who would dispute the honesty of this record have missed the point.

Ultimately Kristofferson will be remembered and recognized for that flurry of songs he wrote in the second half of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s that became hits quite often more than once for a host of artists. But that isn't the only thing he accomplished. Along with fellow Texan Mickey Newbury, his writing helped to open up a staid and conservative Nashville music scene to a new kind of country song that wasn't afraid to embrace poetic sensibilities. He accomplished this by using the simplest of language in a way that made you not only visualize but feel and know exactly what he was talking about while continually contemplating man's demons and the gap between good, evil and everything in between.